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STRANGE TALES
FROM HUMBLE LIFE,
BY JOHN ASHWORTH.

MRS. BOWDEN.

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NOTE TO THE SECOND SERIES.

THE reader may rest assured these narratives are substantially true, as many persons now living in the neighborhood can testify. The names mentioned are real names, both of persons and places. Some of them, as in the former case, have arisen from my connection with the Chapel for the Destitute.

I am surprised and thankful for the reception given to the first eleven Tales, now constituting the First Volume—nearly half a million of which have been sold in a few months—and the urgent request of many friends that I would furnish them with more, induces me again to dip into my diary, where many more yet remain.

I am a tradesman, and make no pretensions to literary ability. If He whom I desire to serve condescends to use me as a medium of good to others, my earnest wish will be realized. To Him my prayer has been, "HOLD THOU MY RIGHT HAND."

J. ASHWORTH.

Rochdale, 1866.

Mrs. Bowden.

The three thousand wives and mothers assembled in Edinburgh, Newcastle, Leicester, and Blackburn, to hear addresses from one who had often met similar gatherings in other towns, presented scenes and suggested thoughts widely in contrast. There was no difficulty in detecting the persons by whose moving power the vast multitude were influenced, and brought together, they quietly took their places amongst the mothers under their special care, without parade or ostentation, standing out from others by that indefinable something, which education and religion ever gives. The wives and mothers, though crowded together, had also their individuality, the truly beautiful, the merry and happy, the sedate and thoughtful, the fair and fat, mingled with the lean and care-worn, the pale and sickly, the careless and easy, nor would it have been very difficult to tell from the appearance and countenance, which of them had good children, good husbands, and lived in sweet homes.

But no gathering of females that I have witnessed has exceeded in interest the one we had in Milton Church, in our own town, on the evening of the sixth of January last. At the expense of one who honors the Lord with

part of what the Lord has trusted him, five hundred and fifty widows met together, sat down to their favorite repast, and for a few hours seemed to enjoy the company of each other. Though the object in bringing them together was to make them as cheerful and happy as possible, to get better acquainted with their social, temporal, and moral condition, and to speak to them words of peace and comfort, still the thought could not be withheld, that all of them had worn weeds of woe, the sable emblems of the departed, that the hand that had brought them bread, the arm that had been their shield, and the hearts that had held them dear were all laid in the dust. Every one of these five hundred and fifty widows had her history, and one part of that history was linked with the tomb.

It was no easy undertaking to speak to this chastened assembly, human language would fail to sound the depths of their emotion. The words of Him who multiplied the widow's oil, raised the widow's son, saw the widow's mite, and says let the widows trust in me, seemed the most suitable to the requirements of the moment, and received the best response of many hearts. Numbers in that memorable meeting I knew, many of them attend our Chapel for the Destitute. One of them recently left us, who for several years sat with five other aged females

on the same form, richly enjoying the means of grace, and now, with her husband who died eight years ago, she counts amongst the dead, and I have thought a few words on the later years of her life, may be of use to the living.

The very word, widow, calls forth more or less sympathy, and where it is associated with a group of helpless children, we know that in most cases it means a protracted struggle, and many trials. The oldest child of five, and herself only seven years of age, once said to her mother,—"Mother, since my father died, I have often seen you go up stairs with a sad and sorrowful face, which makes me feel poorly; but when you come down again, your face shines: what do you do at your face, mother?"

Poor little thing, she did not then understand that her mother went up stairs to spread her trouble before Him who knows all sorrow, can help in time of need, and make His children happy in every affliction.

Mrs. Bowden, the subject of this sketch, had no little children, they were grown up when she lost her husband, nor did she resemble the praying mother in her religious views and feelings. She sometimes went to church, but more frequently spent her Sabbath in dusting, rubbing, cooking, eating, and sleeping, probably caring more for her polished drawers, and bright

fender, than for the house of God, or the salvation of her own soul, consequently her Sabbaths instead of being hours of peace, holiness, and joy, were mostly days of languor, yawning, and weariness; and we fear she was a true type of thousands. After her husband's death, she began to be more thoughtful; she saw how solemn a thing it was to die, and knew that if she had been called away, she was not prepared. She attended more regularly some place of worship, her true condition became more and more revealed, the light entered her dark mind, and in mercy she became convinced she was a sinner.

And now commenced a struggle more important, and momentous in its results, than anything that can possibly engage the human soul. She knew that she had wasted years of priceless value, sinned against God, grieved His Holy Spirit, and that His frown rested upon her. What was she to do? Many in this state of mind to quench the striving of the Spirit have fled to theatres, balls, billiards, concerts, operas, novels, pleasuring places, social parties, and drink. God be merciful to me a sinner, is the prayer they seem determined never to offer up. God calls, but they refuse. He stretches forth His hand of mercy, but they regard it not; and what might have culminated in pardon and peace, sinks them deeper and deeper into guilt

and misery, and they swell the number of the great cloud of witnesses who prove that there is no peace to the wicked. What a mercy this was not Mrs. Bowden's case. She, like Bunyan's pilgrim, felt her burden grow heavier and heavier. She went from chapel to church, and from church to chapel, and at last to the chapel for the poor, and there, bathed in tears of penitence, contrition, and sorrow, the still small voice whispered, "thy faith hath saved thee, go in peace!" and then she felt what millions have before her felt, how precious Christ is to them that believe. Her new-born joy filled her soul with unspeakable felicity, filling her mouth with praise and thanksgiving. She spoke about it to her neighbors, told all her fellow-worshippers at the Chapel. Like the poor man out of whom Christ cast the demons, she told what great things the Lord had done for her. The dark, dark cloud of guilt that shrouded in its folds the heart of woe, was lifted up, and the smiling beams of Heaven came down upon her happy soul.

It is painful to hear persons professing to believe the Bible, call in question the doctrine of the conscious pardon of sin Those sweet portions of God's word which to God's children are so precious, because expressive of their own experience, are to such words without meaning.

There must be a spiritual birth or no heaven. To have it and not know it is to remain ignorant of God's greatest gift,—a gift which, when felt, produces the greatest joy: being justified by faith we have peace with God, and that peace must have a beginning, or there can be no peace. A doubter on this great question, residing in Yorkshire, who held high office in the church, speaking to one of his flock on the subject, said, "I do not believe that anybody can tell when their sins are forgiven, except at the point of death, and I question if they know then.

"I am of the same way of thinking," replied the woman "and I think it is all talk when I hear people say they can tell."

This woman had a daughter who came to be a servant in Lancashire, and fortunately for her the new home contained a family altar. One morning, the master, while praying for the salvation of the whole household, made mention of several by name, and amongst them was the name of the new servant. A few days after, the servant sought a private interview with the mistress, and told her how unhappy she was.

"Are you not satisfied with your place?" inquired the mistress.

"Oh yes, I am well pleased with my situation, but I wish to tell you that I have been concerned about my soul ever since my master

prayed for my salvation. The prayer sunk deep into my heart, and I want to know what I must do to be saved."

The mistress, placing her hand on the shoulder of the servant, answered,—"O Mary, I am so glad you have told me; and now sit down, and we will read, and talk, and pray about your sorrow, for I hope it will soon be turned into joy, for God never turns a penitent away, nor wounds without intending to heal."

For several hours, during the several following days, the good lady explained the scriptures, especially the third chapter of John, and pleaded with God on her behalf; then came the great change, and Mary and her mistress rejoiced together.

If scenes like this were more frequent in the houses of the wealthy, there would not be so many registering offices, or so many servants' boxes at our railway stations.

About three months after Mary's conversion, she requested permission to go and see her mother, for she had received a letter informing her that she was not quite well Leave was given her, and away by the coach she went, arriving after her mother had retired to rest. Mary first ran up stairs to kiss her mother, and ask how she was, then took off her bonnet and shawl, and made herself a cup of tea. Before

blowing out her candle for the night, Mary asked her mother if she might read a psalm.

"Yes, child, if you wish," was the answer.

Mary read the ninety-first Psalm, and after a pause said, "Mother, must I pray with you?"

"Yes; but can you pray without a book, child?"

"Praying is telling God what we want. with humility and truth, mother."

Mary knelt down, and after thanking God for her own salvation, prayed earnestly for the salvation of her mother,—so earnestly that the mother was much astonished and affected. During the following day, at the request of her mother, Mary read and prayed with her many times; she felt herself a poor sinner, and sought a Saviour; and before Mary returned to her place of service, she had the unspeakable joy of hearing her mother tell that she had found Jesus. The same day, the man high in office in the church called to see her; the moment he entered, she said,—"I am glad you have called, please sit down, for I must tell you we have both been wrong, we may possess conscious forgiveness of sin and peace through believing. I know we may, for through the shed blood of Christ, and the instrumentality of my dear child, I now enjoy it. What a mercy! what a mercy!"

The gentleman rose up, walked toward the

window, looked out, and began to whistle, then turning to the daughter, he said,—"Young woman, I think your mother is not so well to-day, she is evidently rambling; good morning."

"Rambling!" replied the mother, with a smile, "rambling! I wish I had rambled thirty years since."

What a mercy, that this great question of a knowledge of sins forgiven is so plainly taught in God's own word. He there tells us, that the Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirits that we are the children of God. David said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord, and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us. Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven. And Paul in the Acts says, Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness.

Amongst the many happy people attending the Chapel for the Destitute, none seemed to enjoy the means more than Mrs. Bowden. She called the week-night service her little Sunday, a lift by the way, the green spot in the wilderness, and it was truly cheering to see her and a crowd of poor people, many with shawls on their heads instead of bonnets, and clogs on their feet instead of shoes, but all clean and orderly, take their accustomed places on the

Thursday evening, and all join in praise and prayer. The wide contrast betwixt some of their homes and this house of peace made it to many of them a Bethel indeed. These poor, dear people, many of whom, like Mrs. Bowden, had found the pearl of great price, highly valued these little Sundays. In all churches a love for the social means of grace is one sign of spiritual health in either rich or poor; and those that are the most anxious to increase their spiritual strength will esteem these the most highly. When we try to find arguments against class meetings, church meetings, prayer meetings, &c., it is an indication that we are not very fast growing in grace: we need these helps by the way. The world daily rolls in upon us, and we need a strong arm to roll it back, to keep it in its proper place. Means are required, and the week-day means are often a powerful check.

Mrs. Bowden experienced the truth of our Lord's words, "in me ye have peace;" but she had one great anxiety: all her family were not saved. That they all might find the Saviour she had found her earnest, constant prayer. The intensity of this wish can only be understood by those that have experienced it. To have a husband or a wife, a brother or a sister, walking down to eternal death, heedless of all entreaties or persuasions, is an unspeakable

trouble. I recently saw three sisters weeping over their wayward brother, not because he had disgraced himself or them by any open sin or breach of the law, but because he turned a deaf ear to heaven's warnings, and walked in the way of the ungodly. They feared for his never-dying soul. This was Mrs. Bowden's case. All her children were not walking in the way to heaven, and this at times gave her great concern. One of her sons sat at the fire ill of consumption, coughing himself into the grave, and her anxiety on his account grew stronger every day; he had a strange temper, was very irritable and impatient in his affliction, nothing seemed to impress him; this distressed her much She tried all means to do him good in body and soul, but received few thanks and little encouragement. She was never tired of talking about him, and glad when any one called to see him; his sickness was long, and required much attention. This affected his mother's health, but she frequently said,—"I will nurse him, and do all I can for him, to the last moment, but I cannot bear to think of him being lost for ever, the thought of this very near kills me. Oh! if his soul was saved how I should rejoice."

The last time she attended the Chapel she was suffering from a severe cold, and made it much worse, but the circumstances of that night were

so peculiar, that some allowance must be made for her indiscretion.

Many in Rochdale and neighborhood will long remember the last Sabbath of last year. Mingled sorrow and thankfulness will ever be associated with an event that transpired on that day. The Wesleyans of Union Street had long desired to extend their influence to a growing hamlet, just outside the town, and for this purpose built a place for the preaching of the gospel and a Sabbath-school, near the junction of Clark's Lane and Mitchell Street, on the Spotland road. I was requested to take one of the opening services. The dedicating of new places of worship is an opportune time for displaying Christian union amongst Christian professors, and breaking through that narrow sectarian bigotry that withers and chills Christian effort. Having recently conducted published services for thirteen differently named churches, I have learned to love them all, and find that if we were all more shaken up together, we should better display Christian charity, and exhibit to the world one true test of discipleship, loving each other. If Satan could laugh, he would laugh the loudest at seeing the professed followers of the meek and lowly Jesus quarrelling, or standing aloof from each other in supercilious dignity, and in their self-righteousness despising others. If the

words, "he that exalteth himself shall be abased," were well considered, few would dare to say "the temple of the Lord are *we*." Profess what we will, we never are in the true place until we feel we could wash each other's feet.

The day on which the new place of worship in Spotland Road was opened was fearfully stormy; a hurricane, terrible in its consequences swept across the country, levelling to the ground many buildings in course of erection. About ten minutes to four, its fury was so terrible, and its force so irresistible, that our building gave way, the entire gable fell upon the people, the two side walls followed, the roof—for a moment held up by the tremendous force of the storm—came down in one mass, and the screams and groans of the buried multitude rose above the roaring storm. One wall still remained. Near this wall I stood with closed eyes and bowed head, believing that my last moment was come. The scene that immediately followed was truly distressing; the maimed, bruised, bleeding, and terrified, forced their way from under the ruins, and in wild dismay ran through the drenching rain and howling blast. Crowds gathered round to assist the helpless sufferers. Firemen, doctors, and policemen, relatives and friends, rendered all possible assistance, and to the amazement of

every one, there was not one killed. Over thirty were injured, several for life, and one has since died.

As the report of the calamity spread over the town, its horrors were magnified; many were said to be slain, and I amongst the number. Our people belonging to the Chapel for the Destitute were in great trouble, and though the storm still raged, they came to the evening service under great excitement. But though I had not received the slightest injury, the sight I had just witnessed, rendered me unfit to conduct the service, and a kind friend supplied my place. Mrs. Bowden, though in poor health, could not be persuaded to remain at home. She wrapped her shawl round her, and pushed through the storm, and rejoiced with them all that the life of their pastor was saved; but she came no more.

When James, the consumptive son, saw his mother's health fail, it softened him to some extent; but he was long before he showed signs of repentance toward God. When persons, either in sickness or health, persistently refuse to be reconciled to their Maker, it is a proof of the grossest ignorance, or downright wickedness. "Ye will not come unto me that ye might have life," principally applies to the latter, but I think it was the former in James's case, and I

found in speaking to him, simplicity and patience was required, the A B C of God's plan of saving sinners had to be taught him.

The time came when neither of them could rise from a sick bed, and it became a question which of them would first depart. Another son, who had been very kind to his widowed mother and sick brother, had long provided for all their wants, proving again that true religion always leads us to honor our parents. When this good son heard of his mother's dangerous illness, he brought his family to see her. One of the children, about four years old, after looking a long time in silence in the face of the aged sufferer, said,—"Grandmother, pray to Jesus, he can make you well again."

This sentence from the little grandchild filled the soul of the dying saint with rapture. The name of Jesus for five years had been to her precious, and that name spoken by the mouth of a babe, and that babe her own son's child, was a joy, indeed. As soon as she could speak, she said,—"I know Jesus can make me well, dear, but I am going to where I shall see him, and then I shall be poorly no more."

Mrs. Bowden's last hours were calculated to cheer workers in the Lord's vineyard. My fellow-laborers yet speak of happy moments they enjoyed in witnessing her serene counte-

nance, and hearing her tell of her glorious prospects. When her head was raised a little, she could see her son in the other bed, who, like herself, was fast sinking towards the grave. Her prayers for him often greatly affected his heart; and when she heard him pray for himself, tears of joy would stream down her pale face.

I felt it a solemn moment to kneel between the two beds, where two immortal spirits were just stepping on the borders of the invisible world; the mother was not without hope for the son, and the son prayed to be buried the same day as his mother. His request was granted. On the day of the funeral, February 13th, the two coffins were brought out of the cottage in Lomax Street together, and over the same grave, at the same moment, the solemn service was read over mother and son. I often look at the place Mrs. Bowden once occupied amongst us. Another has taken her seat in the temple below, who I hope will yet meet her in the temple above.

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